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ABSTRACT

The introduction of a listening comprehension component in the Israeli Matriculation examination of English as a Foreign Language has necessitated research into more effective methods of testing listening comprehension. Oral proficiency has been part of the examination for some time, but more reliable methods of evaluating the test are needed. An article on group testing by Folland and Robertson (1976) inspired the experiment. The test begins in the language laboratory, where students listen to a passage twice for listening comprehension. During the second hearing they are required to answer multiple-choice comprehension questions. In groups of five the students are then invited to sit informally around a table and discuss the tape they have heard. The examiners sit behind them, and each one awards a grade for one aspect of oral proficiency (i.e., lexis, pronunciation, etc.). An overall grade is awarded for communicative competence by each teacher and the average grade is then computed. Results were highly satisfactory in that the correlations between final grades and teacher ratings were high. Students were enthusiastic about the test, and the examiners felt that this approach was as objective as possible. (Author/CFM)

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GROUP TESTING OF LISTENING COMPREHENSION AND ORAL PROFICIENCY

Valerie Whiteson

The matriculation examination of EFL in Israel places the greatest emphasis on reading skills and the least on writing skills; Somewhere inbetween lie the oral skills.

Like many other foreign language teachers elsewhere, Israeli teachers still treat the written word with more respect than the spoken word. In an attempt to ensure that teachers would teach conversation the Ministry of Education introduced a test of spoken English into the matric. exam. This test has been part of the exam. for the past 12 or 13 years and it takes the form of a personal interview conducted by an examiner. The Ministry realises that such an interview cannot produce an objective evaluation of oral proficiency - they are, in fact, more interested in the ~~backlash~~ backwash, or the motivation it provides. Unfortunately it is still true to say that unless a particular skill is examined in the final examination it will not be taken seriously by both teachers and pupils. This part of the examination is now an established fact and conversation forms part of every English high school course.

Last year, for the first time, listening comprehension was introduced as an optional component of the exam. The authorities had carried out an experiment in nine different schools, i.e. academic, vocational and rural. 237 pupils in the upper grades took part. 3 passages were used and the results proved to be satisfactory in that after the experiment 80% of the pupils tested felt that listening comprehension should form part of the final exam, and 86% were in favour of including Listening Comprehension exercises in their English lessons. Teachers were also in favour of including a listening test into the exam.

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Last year, when Listening Comprehension was introduced for the first time as a option; out of a population of 10,000 candidates only 60 schools availed themselves of the opportunity. Schools were given the option of allowing their pupils to answer two reading comprehension passages or one reading comprehension passage and the listening comprehension.

The form of the test was a passage of about 200 words which was broadcast over the radio. Each passage was spoken by an American female and a British male. The passage was read 3 times in all. The pupils were required to answer m/c questions on the text. Although no statistics are available the general consensus of opinion is that the results of the test were good and the Mininstry has now decided that Listening Comprehension will be an integral part of the exam. There are no problems regarding the objectivity of marking the test but teachers still have to be encouraged to introduce listening comprehension as a regular activity in the classroom.

Many of the teachers in Israel are new immigrants and although a large number of these teachers come from English-speaking countries there are many who do not. Unfortunately the proficiency, and particularly the oral proficiency, of some of these teachers is poor. In an attempt to standardise the required level of proficiency the Ministry of Education has introduced a national examination for all teachers of EFL applying for a permanent teacher's license. This examination is also given by all Teacher Training Colleges and Universities which set and administer the examinations themselves after a central authority has passed them. The components of this exam. are reading comprehension, written proficiency, grammar, listening comprehension and oral proficiency,

I would like to speak today about these last two components. Everyone who has been involved in testing oral proficiency knows how difficult it is to be objective in evaluating performance.

At Bar Ilan University the English dept. is responsible for setting the test for students who are planning to become high-school teachers. In the past we used an interview or role-playing format for testing spoken English and we never thought it necessary to test listening Comprehension as all lectures are given in English in our dept. in both literature and linguistics. The test of oral proficiency was conducted by a panel of examiners with one of the examiners doing the interview. This teacher was always so involved in what she had to say that she couldn't be objective at all. The other members of the panel found that fatigue quickly reduced their objectivity too. It was also very difficult to provide each student with the same conditions. We chose a number of topics to discuss and although we varied them as much as possible we realized that students soon found out about the topics and prepared themselves in advance. Also it was difficult to remeber the actual performance and we began to use a tape-recorder to give us playback facilities. This helped, but we knew that the only objectivity in our evaluation was the fact that we usually had 3 or 4 examiners and if we all agreed about a student's performance we believed we were being fair.

Most f.l. teachers are looking for a better way of testing the oral skills and an article "Towards Objectivity in Group Oral Testing" by David Folland and David Robertson in the Jan. 1976 issue of ELT gave us the idea of a new method of testing. In their article Folland and Robertson describe their method of testing spoken English. We decided to adapt their method to our conditions and combine the test of spoken English with a test of listening comprehension.

We examined a group of 27 students at the end of their second year BA in English Literature and Linguistics. Most of these students are planning to become high-school English teachers. The reason we examine them at the end of their 2nd year is that if their results

are not satisfactory they still have another year to improve their proficiency before graduating. We have combined this examination with the evaluation required by the Ministry of Education for future high-school teachers. Although the stress in our department is very definitely on achievments in English literature and linguistics there is a final examination in English language which students are required to pass before completing their studies. This final exam. has made students more aware that they must know language as well as literature and linguistics.

Our test of Aural/oral proficiency began in the language lab. The students heard a lecture on the "Study of Human Behaviour". During the second playing of the lecture they were required to answer a series of M/C questions to test their listening comprehension. The test was aimed at understanding of vocabulary in context; ability to answer factual questions; the ability to see the main idea of a paragraph or of a whole passage and to discriminate between major and minor ideas; the ability to understand cause and effect relationships; to understand underlying presuppostions and to make inferences and finally understanding of the speaker's intentions. The M/C questions were given in written form and students were given ten minutes to read through the questions before the test began. There were 25 questions and an examination of the results showed that the mean was 72.6% and the s.d. was 12.2. The range was 95 to 45. For many of the students the results of this part of the test were disappointing. On the one hand the results may be attributed to the fact that they had never taken this type of test before; but on the other hand it makes one wonder how much of their lectures they really do understand. Israeli students invariably write down every word their lecturers say without making any attempt to develop the skills of note-taking. The kind of test we gave them obliged them to analyse what they had heard and reach conclusions.

The second part of the test concentrated on oral proficiency. We followed the advice of Folland and Robertson when they suggest that the choice of a room in which to hold the test is important. It must be as unlike a classroom as possible in order to help create a real-life situation. We held our test in the teachers common room during vacation. Groups of 5 students were invited to sit around a table in comfortable chairs and discuss the lecture they had just heard on tape. As we had hoped, the topic of the lecture proved to be provocative and controversial.

A panel of examiners sat at the back of the room and listened to the discussion. Each teacher was responsible for evaluating a different aspect of oral proficiency for each student. In our department, in an attempt to try and achieve objectivity even in tests of written proficiency, the same teacher marks the same section of the exam. for each student e.g. one teacher marks the cloze test; one the essay and so on. In this test of oral proficiency out of a total score of 25 points we decided to award 4 for correct syntax; 4 for lexis; 2 for fluency and 2 for pronunciation; 4 for comprehension and 9 for communicative competence. As these students are planning to become teachers the aim we set for them is near-native control of the language.

Each teacher gave a mark for communicative competence which was an attempt to evaluate the overall performance . Then the average was taken as the final mark for that component. The students had been told what we were listening for and we explained that the mark for communicative competence would be awarded for their ability to inter-act with other members of the group. Anyone dominating the conversation would be penalized and bringing other people into the group would be rewarded. The whole procedure was not really novel as part of their course in spoken English which preceded the exam. ~~course~~ included this kind of activity except that in the classroom the teacher took part in the discussion.

We expected awkard initial pauses but there were none. The students spoke naturally and well, and in many cases they became so involved in the topic that it was clear they had forgotten they were being tested. They made an effort to involve the quieter members of the group and we hope that this will be carried over into their everyday conversational habits. We recorded the discussion and stopped after 15 minutes although the students would have been happy to go on.

In the original experiment the examiners used a series of plus and minus signs to indicate major and minor errors. We decided to change the system and award the plus signs for excellence in choice of vocabulary; idiomatic use of language; control of complex syntax etc. We chose to ignore minor errors which did not lead to disruption of communication in any way. I'm referring to the kind of error made by native speakers in normal conversation. A minus was given for the kind of error which did interrupt communication such as wrong choice of vocabulary; wrong tense and certain pronunciation errors.

After each group concluded their discussion it was quite easy to award marks for each component by referring to the plus and minus signs made for each student during the test. In a number of cases when the teacher's evaluation was challenged by another member of the team we replayed the discussion and invariably the teacher who had concentrated on that aspect of the performance was found to be correct. It was also comparatively easy to arrive at a 'composite grade for communicative competence. The grades were then totalled and multiplied by 4 to arrive at a percentage. The final grades were then correlated with the individual's grade for the year's work. The correlation was .86 (measured by Spearmin's rank correlation). After the examination the students were advised what weaknesses had shown up during the test. We hadn't realised that the test would also prove to be diagnostic.

In previous years we had allocated ten minutes to each student for the interview so that this method of testing proved to be less time-consuming. The test took about one third of the time. The students

appreciated the face validity of the test in that they agree that the testing situation was as near to a real life situation as they could possiblxy expect in a testing situation. The panel of examiners felt that their evaluation of the students' performances was as objective as possible particularly as they felt less tired as the test was so much shorter. We also found the experience very rewarding. Hearing our students talking to each other in a manner that would be acceptable in any English-speaking society was rewarding. On the whole the grades were higher than in the listening comprehension.The mean was 82% and the s.d. was 11.3. The range was 96 to 50.

On the basis of this one test we could not reach many conclusions but we found it hard to believe that our students could speak better than they could understand. A more recent listening comprehension test, without the spoken element, yielded a similar result. The mean was 73.4 and the s.d. 11.9. The correlation between the results of the tests measured by the Spearman's rank order correlation was .65 which is positive but not as high as we had expected. This seems to indicate that listening and speaking are different skills and should be measured separately in order to provide an overall estimation of aural/oral skills

We feel, as Folland and Robertson do, that this group test and marking system can be adapted and used in other situations and for other languages including mother tongue testing. We would like to see it used in schools at a lower level as well. The techniques involved in this kind of test are well worth cultivating in order to develop inter-personal relationships and to further our goals of encouraging communication.